

## **Analyzing the Students' Ability in Writing Opinion Essay using Flash Fiction**

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### **Abstract**

*The use of literature in language classroom has attracted language teachers to utilize it in the FL classroom. This paper is intended to describe the students' ability to write opinion essay by using flash fiction, Frank Stockton's *The Lady or the Tiger*. The design used in the study was content analysis design in which the researcher collected the students' composition after they were assigned to write opinion essay by using flash fiction. The subject of the study was 2013A batch of STKIP PGRI Pasuruan. The data were collected in 30 June 2015 and 7 July 2015. The result shows that students were able to make thesis statement that showed their opinion, but unable to develop the essay well, and state conclusion that reflect the essay. Moreover, two thirds of the students were not able to produce the essay in at least 250 words. The problems of the flash fiction used in the classroom and its limitation are discussed in the paper along with the suggestion for those who are interested in using literary work in FL classroom.*

*Keywords: literary works, flash fiction, opinion essay.*

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

Having the ability to write is very important in this global era. Through writings, thoughts and ideas are evident on the paper how people express their feelings. However, writing is a skill that is a very difficult to master. There are

many elements that must be considered by the writer to be able to produce a piece of a good writing, namely clear purpose, organization, word choice, language use, and ideas. Writing, thus, is not just about ideas to write but also the way they compose the elements of writing well. The author should have the ability to process the ideas to form something meaningful and logical for the reader to read. At the University level, having a good writing skill almost become a must for every student to have. This is because, almost every task completed by the students must be in the form of written documents, for example, papers, articles, reports assignments, final projects, and thesis. Therefore, it is important for them to continually improve the writing skills. Moreover, it is also important for lecturers to constantly innovate teaching strategies that challenge the students to write.

Among other writing modes, opinion essay is one type of writing which is oftenly used for college writing. This particular type of essay helps students to sharpen their critical thinking and logical thinking skills. However, learning to write opinion essays is not easy. Many students in the writer's writing class have claimed that writing opinion essay is more challenging than other types of essay writing, like descriptive, narrative, and expository.

This is understandable because the opinion essay has several characteristics which is distinguishable from other type of essay. Firstly, there should be the writer's opinions or attitudes which aim at influencing the readers so that they agree to it. Secondly, there should be facts and evidence that support the writer's opinion so that the readers believe that what he said on the paper is correct. Thus, to make a convincing argument, the author must present a logical and valid opinion which is supported by facts which can be in the form of tables, data, images to support the main idea (Freeley and Steinberg, 2008 at Norquist 2015). Another distinguishing feature is that the opinion essay discusses an analysis and synthesis of an object / subject in which it possess the characteristics similar to persuasive essay (Oshima and Hogue, 1988: 156). Opinion essays opinion can be developed using different developmental patterns or combinations of patterns of paragraph development, for example, by order (sequence), comparing and contrasting, cause and effect relation, problem solving, and description (Gordon, 1990).

Topics which are usually written are topics related to everyday life and have been widely known through the mass media, namely the dangers of free sex, drugs effects, facebook, cyber bullying, natural disasters and global warming, online games, illegal logging, etc. With the advancement of technology today, the sample essays of these topics can be easily found on the Internet. Moreover, those sample essays can be easily read, copied, and downloaded, with android phone / tablet and notebook taken by students to class.

To prevent and minimize such plagiarism, there is a need to have a new innovation on the materials used in the class. One of them is by using literary work for writing opinion essay. Unfortunately, not many writing lecturers are

interested to use topics and materials derived from the literary work because of the assumption that literature was difficult and complex. This is a false assumption. When chosen and selected carefully, literary work, prose fiction more specifically, can be advantageous for EFL learners to learn the target language. The fiction which can be used is short stories. Edgar Allan Poe, in his essay "The Philosophy of Composition," (Poe, in press) says that the short story is a story which is readable in one sitting in which the writer usually spends half an hour to two hours. In contemporary fiction, the number of words in the short story is within the range of 1,000 to 2,000 words so that there is usually only one main theme, one main character, and one main plot (Notes, 2014). In its development, the short story has a new form, which is called flash fiction or mini fiction.

Among the various kinds of genre, short stories is one type of prose fiction that is utilizeable for learning to write. Among teachers and practitioners, there is wide agreement that literature can be used as teaching and learning tools in EFL classroom (Rahimi, 2014; Babae & Yahya, 2014; Floris, 2004; Obediat, 1997). However, most papers published in the journals do not provide sufficient information in what way fiction can benefit learners. Therefore, more evidences need to be presented so that there is convincing information that fiction is indeed helpful for the students. In writing class in STKIP PGRI Pasuruan, the lecturer utilized flash fiction for learning to write opinion essay for the first two meeting. This paper aims to describe the students' ability to write opinion essays through the use of flash fiction in English Education Study program.

### **Research Problem**

The problem in this research is formulated as follows. How is the students' ability to write opinion essays by using flash fiction? The main question is sub divided into three questions:

- a) How is the students' ability to make a thesis statement in the first paragraph in the opinion essay by using flash fiction?
- b) How is the students' ability to develop the paragraph through the provision of relevant examples from the flash fiction?
- c) How is the students' ability to make conclusion that reflect the whole essay by using flash fiction?
- d) How many words are produced by the students in their opinion essay by using flash fiction?

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **2.1 Flash Fiction**

The term fanfiction or flash fiction appeared in the 1980s in which two editors named Robert Shapard and James Thomas popularized and published a collection of flash fiction series or Sudden Fiction less than 2000 words (Sustana, 2015). Sustana also added that this type of flash fiction was growing in 1986 in

which World's Best Short Short Story Contest was held by Jerome Stern, the director of creative writing from the University of Florida. At that time, Jerome Stern challenged contestants to write short stories with no more than 250 words, though later he revised the limit into 500 words.

There is no clear agreement among writers in relation to the length of flash fiction. Budman and Hazuka (in press) define flash fiction as short stories written in 500 words or less. Mean while, Emery (2012) defines flash fiction as a short story which consists of 300-1000 words. To have a better understanding of the length of flash fiction, Novak (2016) gives better definition. He states that the length which is most widely accepted ranges from 250 to 750 words, but for some groups who want to have more creativity and do not like restrictions can accept anything under 2,000 words as flash fiction. Novak's (2016) description of flash fiction is more acceptable as it can accomodate differences in the important definition of 'flash' fiction. Some types of short stories that can be categorized as flash fiction is a short story written by Kate Chopin as *The Blind Man* and *The Story of An Hour* (Chopin, 2013).

The development of Flash fiction has been influenced by the new media in the 21st century that is the internet usage with its software applications, namely twitter, facebook, and digital application such as smartphones and e-book (Luch, 2014). He believes because of its 'concise fictional text' (p.223), flash fiction can be read, consumed, enjoyed in a very short time span. As a result, in this era where everything is demanded to be fast-moving, flash fiction has found its way in the modern life.

## **2.2 Literature in Language Teaching**

There is a growing interest of using literature in English language classroom. This can be seen from topics offered in seminars and academic discussions. Some even called using literature in language teaching as an influential tool and trend (Babae & Yahya, 2014), the "best resources" in EFL classroom (Floris, 2004), and "paramount role" in ELT (Rahimi, 2014).

The use of literature in language classroom has many benefits for learners, such as enriching the students' language and cultural competence, introducing real life teaching materials, and triggering personal involvement (Floris, 2004). However, despite of positive supports on teachers and language instructors, there has been hardly any research focusing on the use of literature in language classroom.

## **3. RESEARCH METHOD**

This research uses content analysis design. The researcher analyzes the students' composition after they wrote opinion essays as instructed by the lecturer. The subjects of the study were the 2nd semester students of English Education Study Program STKIP PGRI Pasuruan in academic Year 2014-2015. There were 24 students in 2013A batch. The data were collected on 30 June 2015

and 7 July 2015. The flash fiction used was the simplified version of *The Lady or the Tiger* by Frank Stockton in 2000 words. In the first meeting, the lecturer explained about the types of essays, the pattern of development in the essay, and some exercises. In the second meeting, the students were asked to write their opinion about the story in relation to the ending of *The Lady or the Tiger*. The writing prompt given to the students was the students should present their opinion of which door the princess would show to her lover in the arena; the door that led to the lady or the door that led to the tiger, and give their reasons why she chose one but not the other.

### **3.1 Procedure**

There are three stages of learning, namely the preparatory stage, pre-writing, and the writing phase. The preparation phase aims at providing basic knowledge about the topics discussed. The background knowledge was about the author of the story followed with class discussion about the story in general by guessing the content from its title. The second phase was pre-writing. At this stage, students were given exposure to the text. After they read the story, class discussion followed. This discussion was aimed at finding out how far the students understood the text. Discussion at this stage includes the main idea, characters, setting, chronology of events, climax and the message. The third stage is the stage of writing. At the stage of writing, the students were asked to write his ideas about the short stories in the form of opinion essay.

### **3.2 Instruments**

The main instrument used was documentation. The researcher documented the students' composition after they were assigned by the lecturer to write opinion essay. The additional instrument used was observation during the teaching and learning process. During the observation, the lecturer used observation guide which focused on the phases of the teaching and learning process. The third instrument used by the researcher was the scoring guide. The researcher assessed the students' essay by using analytic scoring rubric which focus on the writing elements, namely the ability to state thesis statement, the ability to provide at least two relevant examples/facts from the story, the ability to conclude their essay that reflect the whole essay, and the ability to write the essay at least in 250 words.

## **4. FINDINGS**

The answer of the research problems are presented in this section. The description of the students' ability in writing opinion essay by using flash fiction is described in tables that follow.

#### 4.1 The Students' Ability to make Thesis Statement

The first research question that needs to be answered is the students' ability to make thesis statement that shows their opinion. In the writing prompt, the students were asked to give their opinion on which door that the princess would show to her lover in the arena; whether it was the door that led to the tiger or the door that led to the girl. From the total of 24 students, their opinions were divided into two categories or choices. Some of them wrote that the princess would show the door that leads to the girl, while others thought that the princess would show the door that leads to the tiger. Their opinion, however, should be stated in the form of thesis statement with its controlling ideas to be developed in the body of the essay.

**Tabel 1. Thesis statement**

| No | The ability to present opinion in the form of thesis statement | <i>The Lady or The Tiger</i> (Frank Stockton) |      |
|----|--|---|------|
|    |  | F   | %    |
| 1  | Yes  | 22  | 91%  |
| 2  | No   | 2   | 9%   |
|    | Total  | 24  | 100% |

Table 1 above shows that, almost all students were able to make acceptable thesis statement to respond the flash fiction they read. One of the examples of thesis statement is shown below.

In my opinion, the princess in the story “The Lady or The Tiger” by Frank Stockton will point to the door that leads to the tiger because of love and fairness.

.....

(Yuda, 2013 A)

From the data, most of the thesis statements made by the students have their topic and controlling ideas. Referring to the student's thesis above, he was able to make thesis statement with two controlling ideas, namely *love* and *fairness*.

#### 4.2 The Students' Ability to Develop the Paragraphs

The data show that although almost all of them were able to make thesis statement that show their opinion, not many of them were able to develop their controlling ideas well, even most of them were underdeveloped.

**Table 2. Paragraph Development**

| No | The ability to develop the paragraphs by giving at least two examples/facts from the fiction | <i>The Lady or The Tiger</i> (Frank Stockton) |   |
|----|--|---|---|
|    |  | F   | % |

|   |       |    |      |
|---|-------|----|------|
| 1 | Yes   | 4  | 16%  |
| 2 | No    | 21 | 84%  |
|   | Total | 24 | 100% |

Table 2 shows that only four students who were able to develop the essay appropriately, while 84% of them developed the body of the paragraph with no relevant examples as shown in the story. One of the student's works with relevant examples is shown below.

.....

*In this very case, the princess was faced with such a complicated thing related to not only her love, but also her life, and her future life as well. All the decision about the young man being dead or alive was on her hands. She knew that too well and she knew how much love she had for him and how he loved her. But one thing that made her upset and furious inside was she had spotted him having talks with other girl and that made the princess uncomfortable. Ever since the spotting, she did not know what to feel again towards the young man. Apparently, those days of her being upset happened to be the days that would lead the young man to his punishment set by her father. Those were the hardest times that had ever existed in her life. She was battling with herself to come up with the right decision for her good whether or not to show him death or live. But she was just a young girl. Young girls tend to make decision which are only good for themselves only. She was in love, but she was upset and burned with jealousy from head to toe. Those things were haunting her as if eating her alive. She would come to a horrible decision when she had decided to show him the door that lead to the tiger because she only thought about her feeling instead of the good of their relationship. Thus, the princess would rather have him die with the tiger eating him alive to pieces than to have him living his life with another girl that would never be her.*

.....  
(Lintang, 2013A)

In her essay, the student's facts taken from the essay were underlined. She, however, did not write the lines quoted from the fiction exactly similar as they have written. She used paraphrasing. The line of the essay, *But one thing that made her upset and furious inside was she had spotted him having talks with other girl and that made the princess uncomfortable.* Originally the line in the

fiction is *Now and then she had seen them talking together; it was but for a moment or two, but much can be said in a brief space; it may have been on most unimportant topics, but how could she know that?*

The second line paraphrased by the student in the sample essay was *She was battling with herself to come up with the right decision for her good whether or not to show him death or live*, while the original line from the essay was *Her decision had been indicated in an instant, but it had been made after days and nights of anguished deliberation. She had known she would be asked, she had decided what she would answer, and, without the slightest hesitation, she had moved her hand to the right*

### 4.3 The Students' Ability to Make Conclusion

Many of the students' essays were not properly concluded. Some of them even had no conclusion at all. The students' ability to make conclusion is presented in table 3.

**Table 3. Making conclusion**

| No | The ability to make conclusion that reflect the essay | <i>The Lady or The Tiger</i> (Frank Stockton) |      |
|----|---|---|------|
|    |   | F   | %    |
| 1  | Yes   | 6   | 25%  |
| 2  | No  | 18  | 75%  |
|    | Total   | 24  | 100% |

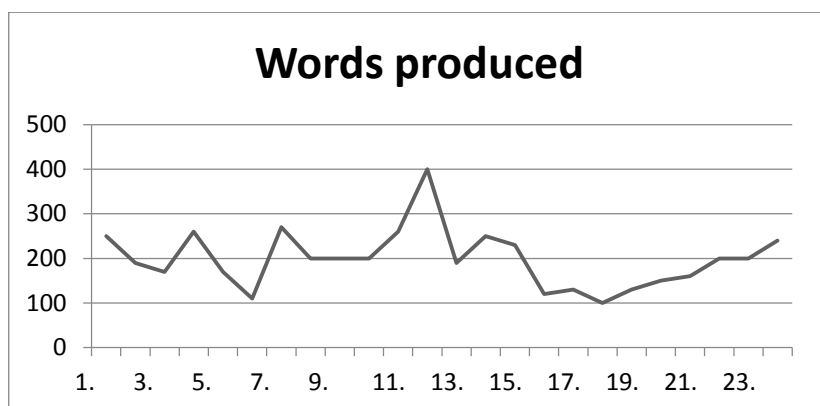
The table shows that only few students who were able to make good conclusion that reflect the essay, and the thesis statement in particular. While two thirds of them was not able to make proper conclusion for their essay.

### 4.4 Number of Words Produced by the Students

The students' opinion essays mostly were written less than 250 words. The least number of words produced was 100 words, and the longest essay had 400 words. To be more specific, the data are presented in the form of chart below.



**Figure 1.** Words Produced in the Essay



To find out the percentage of the students who produced less than 250 words or more, they are tabulated and categorized. The result is presented in table 4.

**Table 4. Number of words**

| No | The ability to produce > 200 words | <i>The Lady or The Tiger</i> (Frank Stockton) |      |
|----|------------------------------------|---|------|
|    |                                    | F   | %    |
| 1  | Yes                                | 6   | 25%  |
| 2  | No                                 | 18  | 75%  |
|    | Total                              | 24  | 100% |

The table shows that two thirds of the student was not able to reach the criteria of 250 words for their essay. Only six students were able to make opinion essay in 250 words by using flash fiction.

## 5. DISCUSSION

Frank Stockton's *The Lady or the Tiger* is a story of a princess of semi barbaric King who fell in love with one of courtiers. The king found out this love relationship and punished the courtier who dared enough to love her daughter. So he sent this unfortunate courtier to the king's arena in which he has to choose between two doors, one that led to the tiger which would kill him, or one that led to the girl which he has to marry. With her power, the princess found out the secret of these doors. She was torn between love and jealousy as she had to make a fateful decision. Surprisingly, the story ends here. The author left the readers to choose for themselves to which door the princess would show through the secret sign.

This fiction is considered appropriate for adult learners, especially in college level as it talks about life experiences. Students might have different opinions whether to choose love or jealousy, life or death. Their opinion of

which to choose would be formulated in the form of thesis statement. In this research, the data show that the students were able to make thesis statement that shows their opinion.

Unfortunately, they were not able to develop their thesis in their body of essay. Based on the observation during the teaching and learning process, there are possibly two causes that explain the result of the study in terms of the students inability to develop the essay, namely the vocabulary problem to understand to the fiction and to express ideas in writing, and secondly, insufficient time to execute the writing task.

The students might have ideas and sufficient background knowledge about the life experiences of love and jealousy as shown in the story. Many of them, however, had difficulties to say these in proper English as they lack of vocabulary to express their ideas. More problems arose when they encounter readings with difficult vocabulary as in *The Lady or The Tiger*. Because of this, the text forced them to open up dictionary too often, although the lecturer had discussed some of the vocabulary and encouraged them to guess from the context. This vocabulary problem arose when they were understanding the text was certainly the first challenge they had to face in the prewriting stage before they start pouring their ideas on the paper. Some researchs have shown that the students' level of vocabulary knowledge is one of the crucial element that play role in understanding the text in the target language (Sidek & Rahim, 2015); Nurhayati's studies (2008:126;2014b,2015a) indicate that the frequency of conducting various game or creative media for example tell a story game as one of literary works could make the students more enjoyable to study English especially to improve the students' English vocabulary, spelling and grammar; retelling the ideas and summarizing text using interesting picture series as narrative text can increase the students 'motivation in reading class especially to improve their reading comprehension; improving students 'pronunciation ability through Go Fish and Maze Game using creative flash cards as the activities which make them tend to become more confidence to pronounce some basic words in enjoyable situation. Because they are too focused on the story read, time becomes much taken for reading. Therefore, when the writing stage began, they were not having enough time to write down his ideas and produce good writing. As a result, the time for revising and editing stage was greatly reduced. If the students are not able to develop the body well, it is likely they will not be able to produce more words in their writing. This means that the student would not be able to reach the requirement of essay level in at least 250 words.

It is believed that literature help the learners to reach native like competence in the target language, learn the idiomatic expression and its usage, help students to have better fluency and creativity in the target language (Obediat, 1997). However, when the students have not reached sufficient proficiency in the target language, the use of literature might hinder them to learn

more. As stated by Floris (2004), the use of literary work should be in the students' level of proficiency so that it will not be a hindrance for them.

On this basis, there are few things to consider when literary work is used. First of all, the difficulty level of vocabulary and grammar, and the level of complexity of the storyline should be in great consideration. Short stories that have high level of difficulty in language and vocabulary, for example, *The Lady or the Tiger by Frank Stockton*, can make students lose interest in reading. High degree of difficulty in terms of grammar and vocabulary will make the students quickly bored and unmotivated to enjoy reading because they will be tempted to open the dictionary more to find the meaning of difficult words than interpret the short story itself.

Secondly, the length of the fiction should not be too long. The flash fiction used in this research is around 2000 words. Theoretically, *The Lady or the Tiger* is still in the domain of flash fiction. However, when a writing teacher wants to use flash fiction in EFL classroom, she can choose the text length less than 1500. The fiction which is too long will make the students quickly lose the sense of their interest to keep reading.

There are some limitations in this study. First of all, the research did not consider the language used by the students in their essay. Based on the data, the students basically had language problems in composing their writing. Since the rubric used in this research mainly concern about the content and the organization, the language problems were let go unnoticed. Thus, future researcher should consider the language use in the rubric to analyze the essay. Secondly, this research took the subject of the study only in particular place describing the existing phenomena under particular condition. Therefore, the result of this research only works for those subjects and cannot be used as a generalization. If future researcher is interested in finding out whether flash fiction is effective to improve the students' writing performance, other design which focuses on the cause and effect relationship needs to be used.

## 6. CONCLUSION

Based on the result of the study, it can be concluded that the students' ability to write opinion essay by using flash fiction is not satisfactory. Although 91% of the students were able to make thesis statement that show their opinion, only 4% of them were able to develop the essay by giving at least two examples/facts from the text they read, 6% of them were able to make conclusion that reflect the essay and wrote in 250 words. The possible explanation of these unsatisfactory results might lay in the flash fiction which is too difficult for the students to read. The difficulties may source from the vocabulary and sentence structure of *The Lady or the Tiger*.

The suggestions are addressed to the writing teacher/lecturer who wishes to use flash fiction in their language classroom, particularly in the writing class. Firstly, the flash fiction use should indeed 'flash', meaning that it should be short

enough to read in one sitting. The teacher should select a fiction with words range from 500 to less than 1500 words. Secondly, the teacher/lecturer should choose a fiction, either classic or contemporer, with moderate difficulty appropriate with the students' English proficiency. And thirdly, the fiction should not be complicated in terms of plot. Simple plot will help students to have better comprehension of the story because, after all, the fiction is just a tool to learn to write in the target language. If the plot is too complicated, the students might be demotivated and the writing class will turn into a reading class. Overall, the use of flash fiction for learning to write will not only help the students to improve some aspects of their writing competence, but it also helps them to sharpen their critical thinking skill.

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